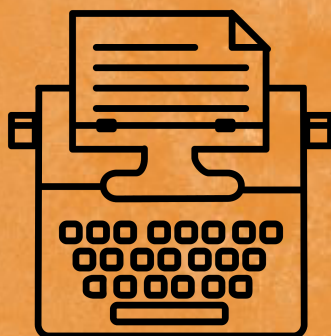


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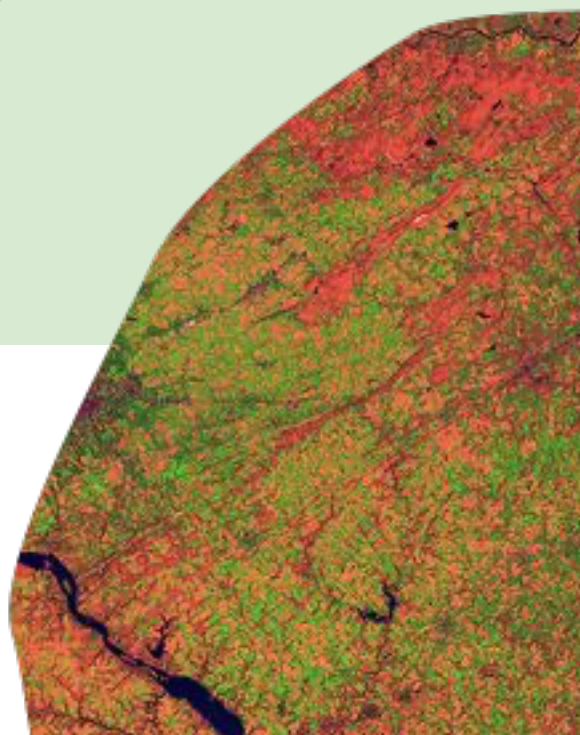
Author:

Occupy Climate Change (OCC!)

Creative story entry



FORMAS



Inverness and Edinburgh, 2200s

Jiangning Cao

22nd December, 2200 – Ration Collection Day

A chill mid-winter wind is sweeping through the Holyrood House - a grand symbol of a monarchy now resigned to history. Edinburgh is covered by a thick layer of ice and snow, and the air is so cold that it seems to freeze the lungs of everyone who inhales. The sky over the city is grey and dull, with the sun being obscured by overcast clouds, only occasionally leaking a few rays of thin light through the cracks. A massive, silent electronic billboard looms overhead, scrolling an endless loop of the government's slogan: "Highlands Reborn, For the People, For the Land, For the Future!"

Colin, age 30, walks through Regent Terrace, wearing a heavy coat and a gas mask. Regent Terrace, which was once kept by the city council for its historic value, is now merely a lonely winding path under the shadow of skyscrapers built in the early 22nd century – only if there is any sunshine to cast a shadow. Snowflakes are falling silently, as if to bury him in an endless silence. It reminds him of his never-met hometown – Inverness. Before his grandmother passed away, she would always tell him that Inverness was a city quite similar to Edinburgh, with River Ness running through and a castle standing in the city centre. Inverness, once seen as a diamond of the Scottish Highlands, is now considered "the land of the dead". After the accident at the Broubster Nuclear Power Station in 2153, the entire Highlands were contaminated by strong radiation, and hundreds of thousands of families were forced to move to Edinburgh and Glasgow.



Fig. 1. Colin, wearing a gas mask, is looking at the allocation collection queue

Life here is hard. As the climate worsens and resources become scarce, the energy winter has left almost all of Europe in darkness and cold. The class struggle against climate change, once united people together, is now a weapon wielded by the politicians in the EU Parliament, while ordinary people endure the consequences. Despite the global technological breakthrough of controlled nuclear fusion in 2080 and the gradual withdrawal of fossil fuels, concerns about nuclear energy never dissipated. When the accident in Broubster occurred, those fears were relentlessly confirmed. “Energy Austerity” are the most common words in the news and on social media, as well as in government bulletins.

The Scottish Socialist Party forced a system of allocations to ensure that everyone had at least a minimum amount of space and energy to use. To help Scottish people, socialist countries across Europe, such as France, Italy, Poland, and Romania, have been going through a campaign called “Highlands’ Aid”, setting a similar allocation system to collect grains and meat and send them to Scotland. According to the newspaper *New Spark*, the increased production should have been enough for the entire European population. It’s reported that the Scottish government ran an internal investigation for decades to find if there was any corruption or concealment, but in vain.

Colin and his family were allocated with a two-bedroom flat on the 4th floor, of a Brezhnevka in the southeast of Holyrood Park. The place, once a golf course, was

repurposed for housing. Also, lighting and heating are now severely restricted, and Colin's flat is only heated for three hours a day, from six to seven in the morning, seven to nine at night.



Fig. 2. The Brezhnevka community Colin lives in

Colin's neighbour Bonnie, a single mother with a newborn baby, told him a month before that she had to rely on home-made fuels, leaves, and logs basically, to heat her home. So, she asked Colin if he had any connections in the underground energy system, even though she knew there would be a risk of being penalised. Colin wrote her a note with his ex-colleague's phone number. "You can try to dial this one", he said with a hard smile, "but I don't know whether George can do it or not". Three weeks later, as Colin was heading towards the distribution centre, he saw Bonnie, with a dead baby in her arms, jump out of her window. He called the community guard while lighting a cigarette. Death here is as ordinary as breathing.

The distribution centre was set in the Old Royal High School. Every Monday morning, Colin would walk through Southside and Holyrood to get the ration for his household for a week. Due to tight resources, the government standardised the distribution of food and basic necessities. The ration bags usually contain some canned food, dry supplements, and a few vegetables, usually cabbage and tomatoes.



Fig. 3. People collect their allocations on Monday morning

Colin's parents always tell him to be grateful and patient, but he is never content with such a life. Although the Highlands have been in ruins for nearly half a century, he never stops his deep affection and connections with his hometown. His grandparents once owned a fertile piece of land on the outskirts of Inverness, where they had used to grow vegetables and raise livestock. From their words, it was a better past for Colin than he had ever seen. Although he knows in his heart that the Highlands are now filled with contamination and are no longer suitable for human survival, he would often stand on the top floor of the Castle of Edinburgh, gazing into the distance of the north, as if he could see through the clouds and ashes. "Perhaps one day we can repair the wounds of the land, and then I can return to my ancestral home with ma and pa and work the fields with my own hands", Colin tells himself constantly.

23rd December, 2200 – Cold Night

Colin sits huddled in the dim light of his room, the cold running through the concrete walls. He can see his breath misting as he squints at the computer screen, the machine whirring softly in the near-silent community. He hasn't told his parents about his plans. They would say what they always do: be grateful, be patient. But it feels like an excuse for acceptance of the current situation, for watching the dream fade. He never likes the idea of simply accepting.

The screen's glow cast long shadows in the room as he scrolled through government data, open and confidential. He wouldn't have been recruited in the Department of Energy without his hacking skills. The page stutters, freezing briefly before loading an article about a plan titled "Cleansing the Highlands". It outlines a project to rehabilitate contaminated land, aiming to implant microorganisms engineered to absorb and neutralise radioactive particles in the soil. And then, as he reads on, a familiar name appears – Irene, his new neighbour, who is one of the lead researchers. However, he misses a line of secret note at the bottom from the Premier of Scotland, Alasdair Bonner, calling it a "brave but hopelessly optimistic" plan.

"Maybe it's the way," Colin says to himself, feeling his heart beat with hope. Without hesitation, he shuts down the computer and walks through the corridor towards Irene's flat. Out of the building block, snowflakes begin falling slowly.



Fig. 4. Colin hacks into government data, looking for any information he can

24th December, 2200 – Christmas Eve

The community comprises residents living in several Brezhnevkas, who are originally from the contaminated areas like Inverness, Elgin, and Dingwall. Some of them have been waiting for a lifetime to go back to their hometown.

"The year 2200 has been a tough time for all of us. A century after independence, Scotland has transformed itself from a former industrial powerhouse into a ground for

environmental regeneration”, in TV says the Premier, “Lessons learned from the Broubster accident made us move closer to renewable energy. Wind and solar installations can be found on rooftops, and rivers have been transformed into hydro-power plants. We need to be patient and endure these temporary difficulties. UNITY MAKES STRENGTH!”

Colin is sitting near the radiator with the community members, sipping a glass of whiskey that tastes like petrol—a mix of methanol, not strong enough to kill him, and ethanol, not strong enough to get him drunk. Suddenly, he comes up with a joke, “Lassies and lads, a professor in the University of Edinburgh concluded his lecture by announcing a clean Highlands is now on the horizon. A student asked him, ‘Professor, what is the horizon?’ The professor answered, ‘It’s a thing you can see in the distance but can never reach.’” The crowd chuckles half-heartedly, the laughter lingering only a moment.

At the end of the Christmas party, Irene introduces herself to the members, “I’m a professor at the university, and I’m working on the Cleansing programme with the government.” The audience is trying to boo her out of hearing the speech. “Folks, please! Don’t you want to go back to the old farm with your loved ones?! The government is funding a program to try experimental restoration in the Highlands. Now we are having a breakthrough in the study of radioactive microbes! They may reopen parts of the Highlands in the next few months!” The news makes Colin’s heart swell, as if the land is calling him.



Fig. 5. Irene makes a speech with community members

After the party, Colin asks Irene to stay a little bit longer, talking about forming a community team. Community members gather around to discuss the plan. “Do you really think we can see the old land?” asks an old man. “If the government implements the tech right, I think we can visit the Highlands with safety gear for about an hour,” answers Irene, “but maybe we can focus on the winter now. It’s getting colder.” People, with the hope of visiting their native land, start their weekend routine of construction and maintenance of the community wind turbine and snow clearing to ensure stable operation. While these efforts may be seen as a drop in the bucket, the difference is quite tangible; at least people haven’t seen any ambulance coming to the community for a couple of months.

28th April, 2201 - Homecoming

It is the day. The day Colin is appointed as an investigation delegator of the community to visit Inverness. It is also the day. The day the government invites an international observation group to the Highlands.

Colin gets up earlier than usual, putting on a slightly oversized coat, under which he can hide a Geiger counter given by Irene, who, alongside most of the research group members, is not given permission to visit the contaminated land. Before he steps out the door, he remembers what Irene told the community members a month ago, “the government suddenly withdrew the funds, saying the rest of the work would be finished by another independent research group”.

On a train from Edinburgh to Inverness, everyone has to put on radiation-proof suits, and the ministers have to squeeze in theirs. Once they get off the train, a photographer starts to take pictures of the shaking hands with the observation group members.

Colin stands at the edge of Tomnahurich Bridge, away from the crowd, looking west at the seemingly restored land in front of him, and instead of hope, a sudden chill runs through his back, as he can hear the clicking noise from the Geiger counter. Sparse vegetation has reappeared on the ground, and a few twisted shrubs and grasses are trying to break through the earth. He knows, as Irene warned before, all this is just an

appearance made by the government's "Cleansing the Highlands" programme.



Fig. 6. Colin, standing on the edge, looks at the cleansed Highlands

When he returns to Edinburgh, a huge electronic screen is standing in front of the community centre, scrolling the Premier's slogan, "Highlands Reborn, For the People, For the Land, For the Future!" The crowd, standing near the screen, is watching it in silence, occasionally murmuring, but is warned off by uniformed inspectors. Colin, behind the crowd, was feeling his breath become heavier and heavier.

Colin finds out that in this era, when "equality" and "environment" are merely banners, the good ideals once preached have been replaced by electric eyes of control and surveillance. Everyone's life is under scrutiny, and rationing of space, energy, and food has become a tool. After his return, community members started to complain that their daily rations are getting smaller, and heating hours are getting shorter. Those who are "reckless" enough like Irene, Diane, and George, to question the programme openly are having "special guests" in the middle of the night. Colin once saw them through the peephole when they were arresting Irene. The deployment team, all dressed in dark naval blue uniforms and black face masks, is led by a male about 5'8" tall, with a peaked cap and a pair of glasses. After several actions, no one has ever made jokes in the community centre anymore.



Fig. 7. The deployment team gathering in the community

Colin returns to his cold bed, staring at the grey ceiling, which is greyer than the sky, thinking about the “recovered” Highlands. He feels the tears streaming down his face. “We’ll never be able to return,” the sound echoes in his head. He shuts his eyes closely, as if he hears a proclamation coming from his head, “Highlands Reborn, For the People, For the Land, For the Future!”

It seems a lot has been erased and cleaned, including the buildings along the Royal Mile, leaving only a shell with a blurred façade. Inverness and Edinburgh can only exist in those deeply buried memories, distant and hazy. Slogans scrolling on the screen are now haunting Colin every time he tries hard to fall asleep.

4th May, 2201 – No More

No more cigarettes, no more whiskey, no more jokes, no more tears, no more family, no more friends, no more nightmares, no more awaking.

Colin feels his body is now as light as a feather.

Epilogue

As a matter of fact, I was trying not to write a story like a Hollywood-like personal-heroism story. In my imagination of year 2200, since people are living in a public-ownership society, everyone would have his/her/their own contribution to deal with a problem.

When facing the ideological term of socialism, apart from the fact that I do love the big picture it depicts, I have a concern about it. Could the way we are building a common sense against climate change be a *jouissance* from which we can find joy in the conflict against the oppression? Might this pleasure of resistance unconsciously depend on the presence of oppression?

In other words, as researchers and activists, we tend to keep our thoughts and actions against climate change “unpolluted”. However, it is inevitable that some people would manipulate the idea to maximise their self-interest, just like the Coronation of Napoleon after the French Revolution.

Also, history leaves us a question: are we seeking socialism, or rather, anarcho-communism? Rosa Luxemburg’s critique of Lenin and the Soviet Communist Party’s democratic centralism suggests Bolshevik-style socialism leads to big governments. Its officials do not engage in production, which could be a yoke placed upon the people (in terms of production, economy, and social structure). Besides, as we often see in dystopian literature, big governments have both the potential and the motivation to conduct surveillance and prevent subversive actions. I have to say that *1984* and *Brave New World* have deeply inspired me.

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Figures

All figures were AI generated based on prompts from the writer.